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# Unravelling the (post-)political in Transition Management: Interrogating Pathways towards Sustainable Change

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## Abstract

Coming to terms with recent insights concerning the (post-) political is a key challenge for transition management. To start with, transition management understands the relation transition initiatives adopt towards existing regimes not in political, but in market terms. This impacts their internal processes, which are based on a deliberative notion of democracy, assuming the existence of a common good and misrecognizing the constitutive role of conflict. Moreover, transition management embraces a governance approach centring on public-private bodies which, in the name of bottom-up processes and participation, especially gives a voice to a privileged group of business, policy and civil society actors. Insofar as citizens get a place, it is merely in their role as consumers. Finally, as it is based on a market model itself, transition management fails to politicize one of the most fundamental current 'landscape' elements. The crucial question is how these features affect transition management's possibilities to contribute to effective and democratic sustainable change.

**Key Words:** Sustainability, Transition management, Post-politics, Democracy, Deliberation, Market

## 1. Introduction

Particularly in Belgium and the Netherlands, but also in other countries, transition management has fast become a 'hype' as one of the most promising ways to bring about a transition to a more sustainable society. Given the context of growing ecological awareness, but disappointment about the limited results achieved so far, this should maybe not come as a surprise. Long-standing environmental movements, but also traditional forms of policy making have been experiencing a kind of 'backlash' during the previous decennia - in the sense that they have been increasingly considered to be inappropriate to tackle the challenges we are confronted with today. This resulted on the one hand in a growing scepticism with regard to the possibilities to avoid ecological catastrophe, and on the other hand in the emergence of new initiatives to deal with the current crises in innovative ways. Given that proponents of transition management explicitly distance themselves from 'old' models of thinking and practicing change, and put forward a new approach instead, it is probably not unexpected that the model is enthusiastically embraced by a broad range of sustainability actors. Indeed, transition management evokes hope again by filling a gap.

But there is more: as Rotmans, Loorbach and Kemp (Rotmans et al., 2007) state: '[i]n fact, the shortcomings of earlier generations of environmental policies were made explicit in light of the call for a new approach'. In other words: it is not only that the loss of credibility of the 'old' models of change opened the door for new approaches such as transition management, the proclamation of a 'new' approach also made 'other' approaches look 'old'. It was thus partly by distancing itself from other attempts to tackle the ecological crises that transition management succeeded in putting itself on the agenda. But how 'new' is transition management? How should its discourse on this terrain be understood? To which extent does it indeed bring hope for effective change? And will it also be capable of realising this change in a democratic way?

Transition management developed a discourse relying on concepts such as adaptive governance, reflexivity, complexity, long-term thinking, multi-actor, multilevel systems, social learning and network management (Kemp and Loorbach, 2003; Loorbach, 2002, 2007, 2010; Loorbach et al., 2008; Rotmans and Loorbach, 2009; Rotmans et al., 2007; Sondejker et al., 2006). Other approaches are criticised for not taking these key innovative insights and concepts into account. Interestingly, this criticism is levelled both against regulatory environmental policies and classical liberal market approaches. As Derk Loorbach (2010) states: 'both top-down steering by government [...] and the liberal free market approach [...] are *outmoded* as effective management mechanisms to generate sustainable solutions at the societal level' [our emphasis]. He adds: 'but it is at the same time impossible to govern societal change without them' (see also Loorbach, 2002; Loorbach, 2010, p. 162; Sondejker et al., 2006). According to Loorbach, governments should leave behind the idea that they can tackle the complex problems we are confronted with 'alone' (Loorbach, 2002, p. 1). Therefore, he argues that 'new modes of governance' have to be sought (Loorbach, 2010, p. 161-162). Other important elements of transition management are its plea for a more 'reflexive' approach (Rotmans et al., 2001a), the idea that sustainable development should not be considered as an end goal, but rather as a continuous process, and that policy objectives therefore should not be 'set in stone' (Loorbach, 2007). Finally, reflexive long term thinking is advocated based on the idea that complex societal problems cannot be solved by achieving quick results through the development of a blueprint with fixed criteria (Loorbach, 2007; Rotmans et al., 2001a).

These are all valuable reflections as such. However, the key questions are whether the transition model that is developed on this basis succeeds in fulfilling its promises and what are the consequences of these choices on other terrains. As we will argue in this article, to fully understand its merits, but also its limitations, we have to situate transition management in its broader social, economic and especially 'political' context. This context is increasingly diagnosed by contemporary political theorists as post-political, and many of its main characteristics also relate to the core of transition management. Indeed, a number of criticisms which have arisen against transition management can be conceptualised through the lenses of these theories of the political, as they all relate to the fact that transition management does not take the 'political' reality of society enough into account.

In what follows, we will first introduce transition management and discuss why it triggers so much enthusiasm. In a second instance, we will briefly introduce the work of political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek, focusing in particular on Mouffe's writings. In the subsequent section we will argue that transition management bears the hallmark of current 'post-political tendencies', and why this critique of post-politics (or (de)politicisation) challenges its core. The following elements will be explored. To start with, relying on a deliberative model of democracy, transition management fails to fully acknowledge power relations, radical pluralism and from the possibly constitutive role of conflict in society. In so far as conflict gets a place, it is framed as a market-

oriented instrument stimulating innovation. Secondly, transition management can be understood as a specific variant of an ongoing tendency towards ‘governance’, which, in a guise of bottom-up processes and participation, risks to redistribute power from what should be ‘all citizens’ towards non-elected groups of ‘important’ business and civil society actors. The implication of this is that ‘the people’ do not get a place as possible actors of change in this transition process. Sometimes, they are taken into consideration in their role as consumers, but even that is not always the case. Thirdly, as it is based on a market model, transition management presents one of the most fundamental current ‘landscape’ elements (the neoliberal political economy) as neutral, thus obscuring its political nature.

This paper aims to unravel the (post-)political in transition management. The challenge transition management is confronted with, we will argue, is to come to terms with recent insights concerning the political, which is of crucial importance if we want to lay out effective and democratic pathways towards change.

## **2. Transition management**

Transition management is often understood as the policy application of transition theory, which, starting from a multi-level perspective, considers transitions as the product of the interaction between several levels: the regime, niche and landscape level (Geels, 2002, 2005b). The theory states that transitions take place when radical niche innovations break through and succeed in changing the existing regime (Geels, 2010; Geels and Schot, 2007; Raven, 2005; Raven et al., 2011). The crucial question is therefore what the conditions are for niches to break through, or, in other words, why some niches ‘make it’ and others do not (Paredis, 2009). This would be partly related to the maturity of the niche, but also to elements which are external to it (Geels, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a; Hoogma et al., 2002; Raven et al., 2010). Innovations which arise in niches become more easily a success if they can hook on to developments in the regime and/or landscape level. For instance, ‘climate change’ can be seen as a change on the landscape level which will possibly put pressure on the current mobility, food, energy and housing systems. In this way, ‘windows of opportunity’ can arise for innovations such as zero energy houses or solar panels to break through (Geels, 2004a; 2004b, p. 37; 2005a). But opportunities can also emerge within a regime itself, especially when the internal logic of a regime is getting disturbed (Geels, 2002; Geels, 2004a). For example, the car only gives freedom and comfort as long as not everyone has one, as traffic jams subvert these advantages. The regime of the car becomes disturbed by the traffic jams, which can provide a window of opportunity for innovations such as electric bikes. In this way, internal developments within the regime co-evolve and can facilitate the breakthrough of innovative niches.

At first sight, these insights seem more than promising in the context of the pursuit of sustainability. Indeed, are we today not in a situation of landscape pressure (e.g., climate change), internal tensions within a number of regimes (e.g., traffic jams) and promising niches (e.g., electric bikes)? Transition management can have a stimulating effect to the extent that it shows that several crucial transition factors are already present today and can be relied upon to shape the urgently needed change. Furthermore, if we can understand how transitions happen, it should maybe not be so difficult to steer them a bit more consciously and pro-actively? The idea behind transition management is that through the study of how transitions happened in the past, a model can be developed on how transitions can be steered in the future, this time in view of realising sustainable change. If change is to happen, so proponents of transition management argue, it does not ‘erupt’ as a revolution, but it is rather a matter of ‘carefully chosen incremental steps’ which lead to ‘evolutionary’ change (Kemp and Loorbach, 2003; Kemp et al., 2007b).

But this is not the only element which makes transition management sound promising in many people's ears. Transition management relies on the conviction that, if approached in a well-considered way, a broad range of actors from different societal backgrounds can achieve consensus about the urgency of the problems at stake and about the related long-term goals to be realised (Kemp and Loorbach, 2003, p. 10). As Loorbach and Rotmans (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2006, p. 10) explain, transition management allows for 'diversity and informed dissent in the short term', while at the same time it opts 'for consensus on long-term sustainability goals'. In order to achieve this, transition management takes an outspokenly deliberative approach to collective decision-making. Indeed, it starts from the conviction that if a benevolent framework of dialogue is established, the pursuit of short-term or corporatist interests can be overcome, actors can be genuinely open for each other's perspectives (Loorbach, 2002, p. 6), learn from each other (Loorbach, 2007) and generate innovative and refreshing ideas (Sondeijker et al., 2006) in view of long-term sustainability. For instance, Jan Rotmans and his colleagues have defined transition management as 'a deliberative process to influence governance activities in such a way that they lead to accelerated change directed towards sustainability ambitions' (Rotmans et al., 2007, p. 239).

One of the key ideas underpinning this approach is that the 'confrontation between different perspectives [...] might lead to alternative "out of the box" solutions' (van der Brugge and Rotmans, 2007, p. 262). In this way, new and innovative approaches would be arrived at. To make that possible, setting up creative processes of exchange and dialogue between a carefully selected range of societal actors is key. As Loorbach (2007, p. 118) explains, 'it is important that there are an equal number of forerunners from the societal pentagon: government, companies, non-governmental organisations, knowledge institutes and intermediaries'. Transition management thus relies on a participatory multi-actor governance model (Boulanger, 2008; Loorbach, 2002, 2007; Loorbach and Rotmans, 2006; Loorbach et al., 2008; Rotmans et al., 2001a; van der Brugge and Rotmans, 2007; Van der Brugge et al., 2005).

More concretely, a 'transition process' starts with bringing together a number of 'innovators and visionaries' (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2006, p. 9) in a 'small innovation network of selected frontrunners' (Loorbach et al., 2009, p. 5), called a transition arena. The process begins by developing an 'image of a desired future system state' (Loorbach, 2007, p. 118) or *Leitbild* (Dierkes et al 1992 in Loorbach, 2007). When a consensus on this long-term guiding vision is reached, a multiplicity of possible transition pathways is elaborated. The subsequent process is conceived in such a way as to remain as open as possible. Rather than choosing one pathway early in the process, different transition experiments are launched that can possibly become the starting points for these transition trajectories (Loorbach, 2002, 2007; Loorbach and Rotmans, 2006; Rotmans and Loorbach, 2009; Sondeijker et al., 2006). More in particular, transition experiments are supposed to develop into interesting 'niches'. The expectation is that if these niches succeed in breaking through, a transition process is set off.

The deliberative model of democracy, from which transition management clearly borrows a number of key concepts, was originally developed by the renowned philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1984). According to this approach, the ideal of a democratic society is one where consensus is sought through dialogue. This consensus can be reached through an ideal speech situation, in which only the better argument counts, strategic games and considerations of power are invalid, and everyone is open to each other's claims. This model of democracy should be distinguished from what is called an aggregative model of democracy (Tinnevelt, 2003). The latter conceives of democracy as a method to aggregate previously existing individual or group interests through procedures such as voting or negotiation. We will come back to this discussion on democracy below.

In a relatively short lapse of time, quite a number of transition processes have been launched following this approach. In the Netherlands, transition arenas have been set up focusing on energy (Kemp et al., 2007b; Rotmans et al., 2001a), water management (van der Brugge and Rotmans, 2007; Van der Brugge et al., 2005), waste management (Kemp et al., 2007a), transportation (Brown et al., 2004; Elzen et al., 2004; Kemp and Rotmans, 2004), agriculture (Poppe et al., 2009) and healthcare (Hegger et al., 2007; Kivisaari et al., 2004). In Flanders, transition arenas were launched related to sustainable living and building (DuWoBo), sustainable material management (Plan C) (Paredis, 2010, 2011), sustainable agriculture, next to an atypical transition arena composed of civil society actors.

However, while actors from different backgrounds enthusiastically embrace this new and promising model, both sympathetic and more stringent criticisms have emerged (Avelino, 2009; Meadowcroft, 2009; Shove and Walker, 2007). A number of these criticisms can be summarised by stating that transition management does not take the 'political' reality of society enough into account, and as a result risks to fail to realise its promises. A number of political theorists have described our current era as post-political or as characterised by deep forms of depoliticisation (Mouffe, 2006; Žižek, 2000), and transition management does not seem to easily escape this condition. In the next paragraph, we will briefly explain what is meant by 'the post-political' in order to subsequently relate this concept to the discussion on transition management.

### **3. The (post-)political and its tenets**

A number of scholars have developed critical analyses of transition management, whereby they sometimes come close to diagnosing its post-political thrust, without, however, fully bringing to bear the critique of post-politics or the loss of 'the political' as developed today in political theory (see further). It is our conviction that looking through the lenses of these theories of the political can yield a more precise diagnosis of both the merits and difficulties which transition management is confronted with.

'The political' is a complex term, which is given different meanings by different scholars, such as Chantal Mouffe (2006), Slavoj Žižek (2000) and Jacques Rancière (2006). In order to circumscribe the concept more precisely, we will especially make use of the path-breaking work of Chantal Mouffe, which is particularly relevant as she has formulated a trenchant critique of the deliberative approach to democracy which is central to transition management.

In order to fully grasp what 'the political' is about, the concept has to be clearly distinguished from that of 'politics'. This latter notion refers to the institutions such as the parliament or voting, or more in general, to a specific social sphere which we usually call politics (Mouffe, 2006). 'The political', in contrast, refers to a discourse in which the existence of power, conflict, and contingency is recognised. The importance of this latter term is that it makes it possible to conceptualise 'depoliticisation' as the 'loss' of 'the political'. Indeed, there will always be politics as a specific sphere where decisions are made and new laws and rules are produced. But this activity, and society at large, are not always necessarily understood in political terms. Technocratic discourses, for example, fail to acknowledge the contingent and contestable nature of decisions taken in the sphere of politics. They tend to portray the act of governing as neutral, or as scientifically grounded, thus making invisible that we are always dealing with the exercise of power in a context of potential disagreement.

From this perspective, Mouffe (2006), but also Žižek (2000) and Rancière (2006) analyse current society as post-political (or post-democratic in the case of Rancière) to the extent that it is pervaded by a kind of consensus thinking and a technical and managerial

attitude. These tend to overlook the reality of power and decision and to downplay the existence of conflict and debate about the way society is organised and about multiple future possibilities and different strategies to reach these. The reason why the recognition of the political is so important, according to these scholars, is that this recognition is a crucial feature of democracy. Democracy, so it is stated, starts by making power, conflict and decision visible and contestable. As Mouffe argues, '(t)he main question of democratic politics becomes then not how to eliminate power, but how to constitute forms of power which are compatible with democratic values' (Mouffe, 2000, p. 22).

This diagnosis is of utmost importance for the evaluation of transition management and its potential to realise sustainability change. Indeed, despite its often radical discourse, transition management seems to bear the hallmark of what is considered a 'post-political consensus'. As the misrecognition of the political dimension can not only undermine the democratic nature, but also the effectiveness of transition processes, it is of crucial importance to investigate this issue.

## **4. The (post-)political in transition management**

### **4.1. Consensus, pluralism and the constitutive role of conflict**

In his defence of the novel democratic credentials of transition management, Loorbach argues that '(p)arliamentary democracies, political institutions and assemblies are solidified units and categories that were useful at times of relatively clear ideological contradictions and societal divisions (labour, capital, (...)). Societal problems and solutions were discussed and decided upon through 'parliamentarised' and 'democratised' political institutions (Loorbach et al., 2013, p. 68, own translation from Dutch). This vision, Loorbach and his colleagues suggest, is running into its limits today. The classical, nation-state concepts and tools of democratic decision-making increasingly fail to effectively respond to contemporary complex challenges, including climate change and the other large-scale environmental crises. In order to address this deficiency, new forms of governing have been developing over the last decades, under the heading of 'governance'. This novel term refers to a series of modes of steering and governing, whereby a broader range of societal actors, including private agents, cooperate in usually horizontal networks in order to address specific problems. Governance processes are often consensus-driven, relying on dialogue between qualitatively different actors, from governments to NGO's and private enterprises. As Erik Swyngedouw shows, we are currently witnessing a broader societal tendency, whereby the act of governing is increasingly reconfigured into such 'a stakeholder-based arrangement of governance in which the traditional state forms (national, regional, or local government) partake together with experts, NGO's, and other "responsible" partners' (Swyngedouw, 2007). While inclusiveness and participation are key values of many governance systems, the question can be asked how representative and democratic these new forms of governance actually are.

In what follows we will argue that, at least up to a certain degree, transition management can indeed be understood as a new form of governance, based on a consensus-driven multi-actor model, as several scholars claim (Berkhout et al., 2004; Scrase and Smith, 2009; Smith and Stirling, 2010; Smith et al., 2005), and what implications follow from this assessment. Interestingly, transition management does explicitly depart from a traditional consensus model as is typically found in the Netherlands, and which relies on negotiations between social interests, especially workers and employers (Rotmans et al., 2007). As Rotmans argues, '(c)onsensus democracy [...] has an enormous ability to hinder and diminish creative power'

(Rotmans et al., 2007, p. 24). One of the reasons he mentions is the role of corporatism and the fact that especially vested interests are taken into account. According to him, the result is that 'innovative attempts at introducing reforms almost always fail' (ibid.).

In contrast, proponents of transition management aim at developing a conception of dialogue which is much more inclusive, encompassing and open. Loorbach and Rotmans (2006), Rotmans et al. (2007) and Loorbach (2007) stress that the start of a transition process should be kept as open as possible, creating a space for different visions and various possible transition pathways to exist next to each other. As they argue: '[i]n a sense, a transition agenda more or less needs a certain element of dissent, conflict and difference of opinion so that it facilitates innovation, competition and learning' (Loorbach, 2007, p. 121)'.

On the other hand, however, '[t]he objective obviously is to create consensus upon a long-term orientation and convergence in terms of action' during the process (Loorbach, 2007, p. 118). This consensus consists of a shared conviction that structural change is needed and a shared view on the overall direction of this change (Kemp et al., 2007b). As Loorbach (2007) argues, '(t)his consensus is mainly sought in terms of problem definition and long-term ambition, allowing for innovation and competition between ideas, options and agendas on the short-term. So although a consensus is sought on the long term, it drives on the involvement, innovation and creativity of individuals and organisations based on limited consensus' (Loorbach, 2007, p. 88).

In other words, transition management claims not to start from a given consensus but assumes that consensus on the overall goals will arrive if different actors are brought around the table and allow real dialogue and forms of inter-relational learning.

Enabling this open and innovative dialogue is usually argued to be one of the first core aims of a transition arena, whereby different actors discuss in an informal and creative way about new options on how to accelerate a 'transition' and formulate a shared agenda (Loorbach, 2007; Loorbach et al., 2009). For example, Loorbach (2007) attests how the Dutch Parkstad energy transition management project was the result of 'learning-by-doing' based on a 'structured and constructive dialogue' between researchers and government officials (Loorbach, 2007, p. 224). Heiskanen and her colleagues (Heiskanen et al., 2009, p. 417) speak in this context about 'a "discourse coalition" that temporarily shares a particular language' which should be established through dialogue (Hajer 1995 in Kemp and Rotmans, 2009, p. 305).

Although the attempt to set up democratic experiments and adopt innovative methods of dialogue is surely relevant and valuable, we would like to raise three critical points concerning this approach. The first relates to the question how open a transition process really is, the second addresses the distinctive way transition management allows for conflict, while the third elaborates upon the limits of the specifically deliberative approach to democracy and collective decision-making.

#### **4.1.1. A *natural* consensus**

First, we argue that the openness of a transition process inevitably has its limits. While the process is kept open initially, and a consensus on key objectives is supposed only to arise after dialogue, the parameters of the resulting common vision, and especially the framework within which it should be implemented, are already determined in advance. As Loorbach states, transition management's goal 'is to come to an agreement or consensus on the desired future conditions and guiding principles. Paradoxically, in terms of transitions there is a *natural* consensus to be found at the overall level about the need for transition and the normative goal



of sustainable development, while the actors may strongly disagree on preferred solutions or strategies on the short-term [our emphasis]' (Loorbach, 2007, p. 143). Sometimes, specific choices are made to arrive more easily at such a *natural* consensus. As Grin (2012, p. 75), states, for example, these transition arena's 'tend to primarily involve actors who are a priori sympathetic to the idea of the transition.'

In other words, the general aim is established already beforehand. But also the 'tools' or 'methods' to make decisions, and the ways considered appropriate for realising transitions are to a big extent already determined. Admittedly, transition management and the method of transition arenas still allow for some choice, but this is a choice within an already structured setting. Despite its claims to the opposite, transition management, like deliberative democracy as analysed by Amanda Machin, thus 'presupposes the existence of one overarching conception of "the good"' (Machin, 2013, p. 47). As she notices, the problem with such an 'agreement on the common good [is that it] is antithetical to pluralism'. According to her '[t]here is no one 'rational' path to take, no overarching grand green scheme that presents the solution. Both *whether* and *how* we act to combat climate change is a difficult political choice on which there will never be full agreement' (p. 86). As she argues, 'theories of deliberative democracy head down a dangerous path by denying the permanent presence of conflict' (p. 86).

Interestingly, some proponents of transition management not only acknowledge that conflicts will nevertheless arise, but even consider these conflicts as desirable in order to realise transition managements aims. To start with the 'acknowledgement of conflict': Loorbach (Loorbach, 2002, p. 7) describes the process that takes place in transition arenas as follows: 'Within the transition-arena, the participants first have to come to a mutual understanding of the transition-problem at hand and accordingly come to a shared problem-perception. In practice, this step is very difficult because of the conflicting perspectives of the actors involved and the different interests they have. Through an integral assessment of the problem, however, a certain level of agreement can be reached at least on the question whether or not there is an urgent problem.' As is evident in this passage, conflict is recognised and given a place, however, it is considered as something which, on the level of general aims, can be 'overcome'. In other words, this approach suggests 'that by being brought into contact with each other in a deliberative forum, apparently conflictual perspectives can be transformed through reasoned discussion that aims at a horizon of democratic consensus', even if this consensus takes a minimal form (Machin, 2013, p. 4).

With regard to the 'desirability' of conflict, the following quote is telling: '(d)espite what several critics claim, transition management does *not* assume the need for consensus, but proposes the development of diverse sets of images and transition pathways' (Rotmans and Loorbach 2010 in Grin, 2012, p. 84, emphasis in original). Indeed, as also Loorbach argues: '[i]n a sense, a transition agenda more or less needs a certain element of dissent, conflict and difference of opinion so that it facilitates innovation, competition and learning' (Loorbach, 2007, p. 121)'. Conflict thus acquires a very specific meaning and aim. It is useful because and in so far as it facilitates innovation. Conflict is no longer specifically political, but acquires an economic thrust, as the last quote reveals: it contributes to broadening the market of ideas, it generates a peculiar type of competition and creates incentives for transition initiatives. As we will argue in what follows, transition management thus adds to the deliberative notion a market conception of what conflict can imply.

#### **4.1.2. The place of conflict**

Indeed, to the extent that conflict is given a place, the central question is how the nature of the conflict is understood. Here we arrive at the second point. There are three possibilities. First,

conflict can be viewed as a deficiency which results from mutual distrust or lack of reciprocal understanding, and which can thus be overcome through dialogue. As Loorbach suggests, for example, conflict can be the consequence of the confrontation ‘between strong individuals’ (Loorbach, 2007, p. 291). In other words, conflict then appears primarily as a (psychological?) obstacle that can be overcome, by establishing ‘[a] proper balance between niche- and regime-actors’, by creating ‘optimal group dynamics’ and by building ‘trust’, to follow Loorbach. A second possibility is that disagreement entails a radical choice for one or another type of society, based on specific values. In other words, we are then confronted with a cleavage which is constitutive and cannot be overcome as such. This is what political conflict in essence is about (Mouffe, 2006). A third option, finally, is that conflict is rather viewed as something which ought to trigger creativity, stimulate the dialogue and enhance a competitive and challenging atmosphere. According to the latter view, a conflict can be instrumental in realising innovation.

It is to be feared that transition management especially endorses the first and third view, rather than the second. To the extent that conflict is allowed, it ought to facilitate ‘innovation, competition and learning’ (Loorbach, 2007, p. 121). Conflict and competition between ideas, options and agendas are considered as something positive on the short-term, as long as it does not hamper the long-term consensus. Giving a place to conflict and disagreement then becomes a tool for enhancing the overall effectiveness of transition processes. The more fundamental value political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe attribute to conflict is thereby pushed aside. Indeed, according to her, acknowledging conflict as implying a real choice between forms of society, including models of democracy, is the condition of possibility of freedom (Mouffe, 2000, p. 34).

#### **4.1.3. Deliberation and the free and equal subject**

Thirdly, the open process projected by transition management is typical for a vision of democracy that is deliberative in nature, which, as we argue, has its own limits. As already suggested, the type of democratic process taking place in transition arenas partakes of a deliberative view of democracy. It is distinguished from an aggregative model, and typically based on the presupposition that bringing actors together, enabling them to get to know each other better, and exchanging arguments will facilitate convergence and consensus-seeking. Actors can arrive at a common problem definition and long term goals through dialogue and by putting the common interest before personal interests and goals (Bergman et al., 2010; Berkhout et al., 2004; Meadowcroft, 2005). Chantal Mouffe recognises the importance of moving beyond an aggregative model of democracy, but finds fault with the way the deliberative model aims to do this: ‘by proposing to view reason and rational argumentation, rather than interest and aggregation of preferences as the central issue of politics, they simply replace the economic model with a moral one which - albeit in a different way - also misses the specificity of the political’ (Mouffe, 2000, p. 46).

In order to prevent any particular interests from dominating the governance process intended to realise sustainable change, proponents of transition management refer to the ‘collective interest and cooperative orientation of participating actors’ (Voss et al., 2006, p. 425). This is facilitated by the requirement that actors are asked to participate ‘on personal account rather than representing their home organisation or institution’, thus avoiding a focus on their own ‘vested interests’ (van der Brugge and Rotmans, 2007, p. 262). For Loorbach (2007, p. 143), the process of imagining a desired future leads to a new way of thinking and gives the actors involved confidence ‘that a common interest in undertaking a transition effort will develop’.

One of the assumptions underlying this idea is that actors are ‘free’ and ‘equal’, that they are able to transcend their particular interests and goals, and are capable of ‘presenting their ideas in a “rational” way’ (Machin, 2013, p. 79-80). As Rotmans and Loorbach (2009, p. 9) write: ‘Participants (...) must have the ability to look beyond their own domain or working area and be open-minded’.

The idea that learning and dialogue, when organised adequately, will facilitate the development of common goals is of course a hopeful idea. However, how open and rational is deliberation really? As Amanda Machin (2013, p. 80) argues, ‘the deliberative democratic depiction of the discussion as free, equal and rational is misguided’. Even though deliberation can be much more inclusive than previously existing aggregative models of democracy, exclusion is unavoidable. Indeed, Flor Avelino (2009) has aptly shown how the actor selection process to partake in a transition arena is unavoidably exclusionary by expecting certain qualities from their participants. Carolyn Hendriks (Hendriks, 2009, p. 350) tells the following story to make a similar point: ‘when asked how members of the platforms were selected, one chair explained: “for the right solutions, we need the right knowledge”’. Transition management thus not only preselects its participants on the basis of an unrecognised, predefined vision of the *common good*, it also relies on a very specific notion of rational and capable subjectivity. Machin argues that arriving at inclusive agreements, including questions of sustainability, is impossible in the end, and therefore it is important to be aware of forms of power which are inevitably at play when taking decisions (Machin, 2013). Transition management recognises this to a certain extent by stating ‘that sustainability is an essentially contested notion’ (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2006, p. 13). However, its answer is that one should allow for ‘diversity in the short term while trying to achieve consensus on long-term ambitions’. Still, as Mouffe argues, ‘every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony as a stabilisation of power that always entails some term of exclusion’ (Mouffe, 2000, p. 104). Attempting to transcend power games through genuine dialogue is laudable, but power relations do not disappear by ignoring them. Indeed, ‘it is not enough to eliminate the political in its dimension of antagonism and exclusion from one's theory to make it vanish from the real world. It does come back, and with a vengeance’ (Mouffe, 2000, p. 31). Interestingly, Elizabeth Shove and Gordon Walker make a similar observation in relation to transition management, as they write: ‘Even the most primitive attempt to establish starting assumptions would immediately reveal divisions and fractures between opposing interests and ideologies. Fundamental conflicts of this kind rarely figure in the rather ordered and consensual world presented by much of the transition management literature, this being a world in which “interactive strategy development” appears both possible and plausible’ (Shove and Walker, 2007, p. 4-5).

In order to run smoothly, transition processes require that participants look beyond their own background and interests and arrive at an inclusive and open dialogue. Even to the extent that authority arguments and power games can be transcended through optimal group dynamics, however, power is never absent in such occasions. Here we not only refer to the power of one actor over another, but also to the power of one discourse over another. The way a problem is framed already implies certain issues are included and others are not. For example, while transition management advocates an inclusive, participatory approach, Berkhout et al. (2004) see the concept of a transition arena as contested. Power relations and different interests already play a role in the very formulation of the particular vision on how ‘transition’ is conceived of. In other words, in the construction of a discourse or vision, it is inevitable to include certain elements and others not.

The point is that while inclusion is a laudable ideal, it is important to be aware of the fact that every discourse operates through in- and exclusions and that exclusion is therefore inevitable (Mouffe, 2000, p. 21). Exclusion is thus not a problem as such, as it is unavoidable, but it is important to recognise this.

Recognising exclusion and creating spaces where it can be made visible makes it possible to develop more profound debates and oppositions, and to enhance a sensitivity to the fundamental political stakes. The problem is that a deliberative model of democracy, and surely the variant adopted by transition management, has difficulties accounting for the constitutive nature of conflict and exclusion. Therefore, Mouffe argues, an agonistic model of democracy is needed, which attributes a lot of importance to spaces where conflict and contestation can occur. Despite all critiques that can be formulated against it, the merit of the 'old' parliamentary model is precisely that it creates such spaces, including through the confrontation between majority and opposition. In the attempt to move beyond the deficiencies of parliamentarism, this key dimension is often downplayed.

#### **4.2. A guise of bottom-up processes and participation**

Transition management thus embraces a particular version of 'governance' through what they call 'a representative participation from the four actor-groups (governmental bodies, business, NGOs and knowledge institutes/experts)' (Loorbach, 2002, p. 6). Admittedly, this constitutes a relatively broad inclusion of a whole range of different actors. However the question imposes itself: where are 'the people', where are 'the citizens' in this approach?

Instead of fully accounting for the representation of 'the people' in transition models, it is an elite of 'important' actors 'with influence' (Jones and De Meyere, 2009, p. 100), who have 'peculiar competencies and qualities', who are considered 'frontrunners' and thus assumed to act as subjects of change (Rotmans and Loorbach, 2009, p. 6). Loorbach (2010) explains, 'participants are selected based on their specific roles, backgrounds and competences and their explicit ambition for innovation' (Loorbach, 2007, p. 88). Similarly, Rotmans and Loorbach (2009, p. 6) state: '[t]he focus on frontrunners is a key aspect of transition management. [...] In the context of transition management, we mean by frontrunners agents with peculiar competencies and qualities: creative minds, strategists, and visionaries'. More concretely, actors involved in transition processes should have basic competences such as: to be able to 'think at a high level of abstraction [...], be able to communicate abstract ideas and have leadership abilities' (Loorbach, 2007, p. 140). In addition, they need to be capable of 'implementing new policy designs'.

Sometimes it is supposed that these actors represent 'the people', but then in a non-elected way (Berkhout et al., 2004; see also Hendriks, 2009). Sometimes there is even no such representative claim at all. As Hendriks argues, it is 'largely taken for granted that the visions and policies emerging from transition arenas will be accepted and deemed legitimate by the broader public' (Hendriks, 2009, p. 343). And he adds: 'getting the 'right' people to foster and stimulate innovation appears to have pushed aside democratic questions such as what kind of representation do we require, how will participants be held accountable and how will decisions be made and legitimised?' (Hendriks, 2009, p. 349).<sup>1</sup> Grin (2012, p. 75) also underlines that 'fora specifically created to legitimise transitions, such as transition arenas or experiments, are

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<sup>1</sup> In so far as 'the people' have a place, it is mostly within governmentality models. Governmentality refers to practices through which conduct is governed with the aim of realising objectives on the level of a population (Burchell et al., 1992; Foucault, 1994). For instance, one can try to reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases by steering individual people's behaviour in such a way that they see themselves as moral subjects who have to lower their own individual footprint. Not surprisingly, governmentality practices in sustainability matters often focus on forms of sustainable consumption (Kenis and Mathijs, 2012; Kenis and Lievens, 2015).

deliberately composed in a way which cannot produce ex ante legitimacy: they tend to primarily involve actors who are a priori sympathetic to the idea of the transition.'

The point is that in a guise of bottom-up processes and participation, power is thus redistributed from 'all citizens' towards non-elected groups of 'important' and 'innovative' actors from a business, governmental, academic or civil society background. But there is more: as even international institutions such as the UN and the World Bank recognise, 'the poor' will be hit first and hardest by climate change. Yet, transition management barely takes this into account when composing its transition arenas. By excluding citizens from its arenas, the voices of people who are confronted daily with the first consequences of climate change tend to remain unheard. Indeed, a choice is made for what are currently perceived to be 'important' actors, who might often be actors who have a stronger interest in maintaining the status quo. Not only are particular voices excluded from the very beginning, these risk to be the voices of those who suffer most and first. Without any doubt, the concept of 'sustainability' and the pathways to realise it would get a complete different content if these actors would be given a central place.

Sometimes it is argued that 'citizen engagement [...] is difficult because the public are 'not that interested' or because the issues at stake are 'too complex for everyday citizens' (Hendriks, 2009, p. 351). A similar argument could of course be given for any type of democratic decision-making, leading to the systematic exclusion of 'popular' interests. The question is thus not only '[w]hat about those who disagree', as we elaborated in the previous section, but also, what about those 'who are already excluded from participation'? (Machin, 2013, p. 62).

Interestingly, even in critical accounts of transition management, the possible agency of citizens is not taken into account. If they have a role, it is limited to their status as consumers. For example, the Dutch Energy Transition Program mentions citizens as a 'relevant "transition party"' in the following way: 'As a consumer, the citizen can play an important role in the success of the energy transitions by being more aware about energy and energy savings' (ETF 2006 in Hendriks, 2009, p. 351). The involvement of the citizens is thus reduced to their role of 'informed consumers' (Hendriks, 2009, p. 351). Similarly, both Gert Spaargaren (2003) and Shove and Walker (2007) criticise transition management for not taking the 'end-users' of new technologies into account. However, their criticism is oriented towards the negligence of people in their role as end-user consumers, while at the same time negating the role people can have as active agents in transition processes as such. Interestingly, as we will elaborate more profoundly in the next paragraph, transition management situates the possible actors of change almost exclusively within a market framework. It is as if there are two key ways to participate in a transition and two roles that are relevant in society: business leaders and consumers. In this way, transitions are locked in a liberal market model that does not acknowledge the need of its own transition.

#### **4.3. Market relations and the concealment of their political nature**

Despite a discourse on fundamental change, transition management stays within the confines of the predominant framework of the liberal market system. As Kemp en Loorbach explain: 'transition management [...] relies heavily on market forces for the delivery of functional services for the obvious reason that no authority can plan for the efficient delivery of specialised services' (Kemp and Loorbach 2006:118).

As René Kemp and his colleagues (Kemp et al., 2007a, p. 11) argue: 'It is often insufficiently realised that the efficiency of markets rests on the weeding out of sub optimal designs of products and technologies through market competition. Evolutionary change, founded on trial and error, while wasteful in the short term, is often the most intelligent

approach in the long run'. They conclude: '[t]his view greatly influenced the vision of transition management.' The transition management model is thus without any doubt a *market* model which is based on competition, private entrepreneurship and market exchange. Admittedly, the market ought to be corrected in order to protect niches which are not competitive yet. While planning is rejected, a choice is made for 'context control' via specific measures. As Kemp and Loorbach (2006:118) write, '(t)ransition management does not blankly rely on market forces, but is concerned with the conditions under which market forces operate, by engaging in "context control" so as to orient market dynamics towards societal goals. The context control consists of regulations, economic instruments (the use of taxes, subsidies and emission trading), the use of policy goals and covenants and specific types of planning (such as land use planning)'.

Importantly, the fact that transition management promotes a market approach is *as such* not significant, neither should it a priori be considered a problem. However, two points have to be made. To start with, it is questionable whether it is possible to reconcile the maintenance of a regime with its transformation, as, amongst others, Bulkeley et al (2013) aptly notice. First of all, '[i]nnovations build on existing ideas, values and technologies, so few of them are truly radical' (Lovell 2009 in Bulkeley et al., 2013, p. 32). Second, 'the key role ascribed to government actors in creating 'protected' spaces for niche development raises questions as to whether niches are established in order to maintain regimes rather than as a means of fostering change' (Bulkeley et al., 2013, p. 32). The risk is thus that 'radical, systems-wide sustainable development as a goal of transition management policies [is] exchange[d] for technology development, global competitiveness and economic growth on the way to implementation' (Voss et al., 2009, p. 289; see also Kern and Howlett, 2009; Paredis, 2011).

A second problem is that transition management does not seem to recognise the ideological and political nature of this choice to build on a market framework. In this sense, transition management too easily overlooks the non-neutral 'political' assumptions of its own story. As Ivan Scrase and Adrian Smith (2009, p. 719) state: 'TM [transition management] ideas are presented, as the name suggests, as managerial governance rather than politics'. Or as Hendriks (2009, p. 352) argues: its 'accountability is understood largely as a managerial/administrative phenomenon that is about producing effective long-term transitions'.

According to Slavoj Žižek (2009), presenting itself as non-ideological is precisely the masterstroke of ideology. The dominant ideology is the one that succeeds in presenting itself as the opposite of ideology: as management or administration, as neutral science or technique, or as the indisputable result of dialogue or deliberation. He considers this as the paradox of our time: no discourse is so ideological as that of the market, but it succeeds very well in presenting itself as non-ideological. Or, in the words of Swyngedouw (2010): the dominant way to conceive of sustainability transitions is as 'radical techno-managerial and socio-cultural transformations, organised within the horizons of a capitalist order that is beyond dispute'. In other words, radical and urgent change is called for, but only in such a way that fundamental parameters of the market society do not have to change.

Transition management risks to be an almost prototypical example of this. Indeed, transition management has a radical side to it, at least in its discourse. Its proponents argue for 'radical, systems-wide sustainable development', for example (Voß et al., 2009, p. 289). However, if one takes a closer look at how this system change is understood, many things apparently fall outside the scope of the system that has to be changed. What needs to change, is limited to particular market logics that should be steered in a more sustainable direction.

Interestingly, while transition management has developed an impressive terminology to describe 'system' features, it seems to remain blind for the non-articulated market paradigm of its own discourse. While Rotmans et al. (2001b, p. 16) define a transition as 'a gradual,

continuous process of change where the structural character of a society (or a complex sub-system of society) transforms’ – a definition that may refer to any societal change – in actual facts most transition management authors limit themselves to socio-technological changes (e.g., Genus and Coles, 2008) within an incontestable market paradigm. In other words, they formulate alternatives within the framework of what currently exists. The result, however, is that there is ‘no properly “agonistic” debate in the democratic political public sphere about possible alternatives to the existing hegemonic order’ (Mouffe, 2002).

This does not mean that transition theory would not be an accurate representation of how some transitions have happened in the past, or still happen today. Indeed, the liberal market economy can be seen as a key characteristic of the current ‘landscape’. The crucial question, however, is how this implicit choice to maintain the market impacts transition management’s capacity to realise sustainability both in an effective and democratic way. In other words, the question is whether it is possible at all to realise an effective sustainability transition without questioning the way society is organised today. Indeed, in so far as current ecological crises are not in the first place crises of nature, but crises of society and how the latter relates to its ecological conditions (Brunnengräber, 2007; Foster et al., 2010), tackling these crises requires social, economic and, especially, ‘political’ change. Or, in other words, by misrecognising the contingency of the current way in which society is organised, and its historically specific relation to nature, one risks to stay blind for the root causes of the crisis, while investigating these is a crucial precondition for tackling them in an effective way.

There are many arguments to conceive key ingredients of the transition management approach (e.g., competition, economic growth, ...) as fundamental mechanisms which are co-responsible for the current ecological crises (Kenis and Lievens, 2015). For instance, an increasing number of scholars argues that from an ecological perspective, real transition should explore pathways beyond the growth paradigm (Foster, 2002; Foster et al., 2010; Jackson, 2009). However, the ecological impact of economic growth represents just one of the obstacles to sustainability that any market-oriented transition will be confronted with.

Of course, the crucial question is: what does this mean for transition management? This can be illustrated with a simple example. From the perspective of transition management, a breakthrough of the niche of electric cars would be a big step forward. However, would this matter if each year, more cars are sold, as the growth paradigm would dictate? The production of a car requires a huge amount of energy and scarce natural resources. A growing number of cars necessitates the construction of more roads, and even if electricity can be produced in a relatively sustainable way, increasing electricity demand still requires an ever higher input of materials and energy for building the installations that produce this energy. Moreover, electric or not: cars have relatively short life cycles, leading to a massive amount of waste. The implications are paramount: can we realise sustainability while continuing to grow economically? Can we find innovative technological solutions for all problems? Is the creation of new commodities an adequate strategy towards sustainability?

Remaining within the hegemonic framework of the liberal-democratic growth-based market economy and its post-political ideology threatens to be a key obstacle to realise a proper sustainability transition, as the latter circumvents from the need to move beyond merely ‘evolutionary’ change.

## **5. Conclusion**

As transition management tends to bear the hallmark of the post-political consensus, the critique of this consensus challenges its core. To end where we started: to what extent is the act of

framing oneself as 'new', and oppositional voices as 'old', not already a post-political representation of the environmental terrain? Is a real political and ideological discussion not avoided in this way? And, what does this mean for the possibilities of transition management to realise sustainability change?

Indeed, transition management tends to represent society in deliberative, market and 'managerial' terms, and thereby contributes to a depoliticised understanding of sustainable change. But the crucial question is of course *why does it matter?* Why are we concerned about this question of post-politics or depoliticisation in the first place? Within the scope of this conclusion, we want to point to a twofold relevance. First, taking 'the political' into account is a foundation stone for democracy. As scholars such as Mouffe have aptly shown, the ideal of inclusive deliberation amongst partners does not fulfil this criterion. Democracy turns out to be a much complicated and sophisticated issue. Second, taking the 'political' into account is important from the perspective of the effectiveness of sustainability transition projects. Insofar as politicisation helps to reveal the root causes of ecological destruction, it is crucial for tackling these problems in an effective way.

Related to these both issues, acknowledging conflict, contradictory interests and radical forms of pluralism is a condition for avoiding that large parts of citizens become alienated from transition discourses elaborated by enlightened elites. This is not only crucial from a democratic point of view, but it is also a reason why politicisation can be important for tackling ecological challenges in an effective way. Without broad 'popular' support, a transition to another, more sustainable world becomes at least unlikely. It is therefore far from innocent to depoliticise the debate on pathways towards sustainability change.



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